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ABSTRACT

Project IRIS (Improving Reading Instruction School-Wide) is one school district's effort to improve reading instruction. The project's first three years have produced median reading gains of one year or more per student per year. Although the most important aspect of Project IRIS is school-wide commitment to improving reading instruction, other critical elements of the program are the following: using a basal reading series instead of a variety of unrelated textbooks; developing a comprehensive skills sequence chart, making it available to all teachers, and including it in students' cumulative records; issuing textbooks only after reading diagnosis is complete; using reading materials that reflect students' maturing interests; administering an initial reading inventory to all students; emphasizing mastery teaching; ignoring student grade designations as much as possible, while emphasizing the student's reading level; involving teachers in textbook selection and the sharing of instructional materials; conscientiously evaluating program effectiveness; maintaining communication with parents about student progress; and preceding program implementation with inservice activities for all professional personnel. It has been concluded that a well-balanced reading program should be comprised of attention to basic skills, oral reading, recreational reading, and content area reading. (RL)

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PROJECT IRIS, IMPROVING READING INSTRUCTION SCHOOL-WIDE

(a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Regional Conference of the International Reading Association, 5th, Nashville, TN, February 6-9, 1980) by Dr. Athelene P. Carter, Principal, Southwest Elementary School, Lexington, North Carolina.)

Project Iris, Improving Reading Instruction School-Wide was our school's effort to improve reading instruction. We could see our declining test scores, and we were hearing a great deal about children not being able to read, particurly black children and other economically deprived children. As a result of our project, we found that all children, no matter what the ethnic origin of the child was, the family income, the sex of the child, or the parents educational level, all children were making median gains of one year or more in reading.

The following chart reveals some startling facts about the progress rates of our children before and duirng Project IRIS.

PROGRESS RATES AT SOUTHWEST ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
BEFORE AND DURING PROJECT IRIS
(Stanford and California Achievement Test)

Sub Test Topic	Pre IRIS '75-'76 (SAT)	Year 1 '76-'77 (SAT)	Year 2 '77-'78 (SAT)	Year 3 '78-'79 (SAT)	Year 3 '78-'79 (CAT)
Vocabulary	.2	1.1	1.0	1.3	
Paragraph Meaning	.8	1.1	1.3	1.2	
Word Study	.6	1.2	1.6	1.2	
Total Reading	.7	1.1	1.3	1.2	1.3
Spelling					1.5
Total Language					1.3
Total Math					1.2
Reference Skills					1.1

An analysis of the Chart indicates that when compared to the Pre-IRIS year.

1. The Vocabulary growth rate increased five to six fold every year (1.1, 1.0, and 1.3 vs. .2).

2. The Paragraph Meaning growth rate was approximately 50% every year (1.1, 1.3 and 1.2 vs. .8).

3. The Word Study growth rate was at least doubled every year (1.2), 1.6, and 1.2 vs. .6).

4. The reading growth rate (total reading) was almost doubled during Project IRIS (1.2 and 1.3 vs. .7).

5. The total math growth rate has been over 50% higher for the two years for which data are available (1.1 and 1.2 vs. .7).

6. Comparative data are not available for spelling, total language, and reference skills.

All too often, people find excuses for not doing what needs to be done. The teachers want to improve instructions, but they say the principal won't let them. The principal wants to improve reading, but he says the teachers won't do what has to be done. If all other excuses fail then the blame can be placed on the superintendent. If anything is done to improve reading instruction, someone must accept the responsibility. I am not an expert in teaching reading and will probably never be as good as any of my teachers, but I realized in classroom observation that many teachers needed help in being able to effectively teach reading; therefore as the instructional leader in the school, I started the action to do something about our reading program. Project IRIS was the result of this action.

The most important aspect of Project IRIS was that everyone in the school had made a commitment to improving the reading instruction.

With the help of Dr. Richard C. Culyer, III., who served as the outside consultant for the project, we started to work to build a developmental reading program.

Our first step was to establish one lead basal. When one goes into a school, it is not unusual to see every class using a different publishers textbook. This does not provide for any continuity in teaching. A lead basal must be established that all children use. If after completing a certain level in the lead basal book, the child cannot successfully pass a mastery test, then a horizontal approach should be used. Here the child goes into a book at the same level of difficulty, but in another series. Some children need as many as five different books at a level before they are ready to move vertically into the next level in the lead basal series.

There must be a comprehensive skills sequence chart developed and made available to all teachers. Teachers must know what skills are taught in the grades below the one where they are teaching and what is taught in the grades above. The assumption is that knowledge and awareness of higher and lower-level skills will encourage and assist teachers to provide for the wide range of individual needs in their classes. Teachers at all levels should find a sequence chart most useful. As soon as teachers have studied the basic skills and determined the specific needs of each youngster, teachers should begin instructing at the earliest stages where deficiencies first appear. A highly competent reader may lack certain basic skills. As a student masters a skill, the teacher should indicate this beside the appropriate item on the sequence chart.

Each student's cumulative record should include a copy of the skills sequence chart as well as his actual reading level. This record should be maintained and upgraded systematically. The actual reading level recorded should be where the child is being instructed, not the results of standardized achievement tests.

The habit of dealing out textbooks before the children arrive at the beginning of the school year must be changed. Too often principals feel their work is completed if all textbooks

are issued to teachers before the children arrive on the first day. Fourth grade teachers get fourth grade books, fifth grade teachers get fifth grade books and so on. This is a very bad practice. All students who are labeled fourth graders cannot do fourth grade work. Wait until diagnostic tests have been completed and then issue the textbooks. Once children are given books that are too hard for them they immediately drop out of school. They continue to occupy the seat, but most learning ceases. Academic achievement is most effective and efficient when information is presented on a level which a student can handle.

Students should be placed in materials which reflect their maturing interests. Fourth and fifth grade students who are not reading near grade level should not be expected to read Sally, Dick and Jane. Today's market has many books that are high interest, low vocabulary materials that are appealing to these students. We are firm believers in the Language Experience approach for these students. A teacher's attitude may determine the extent to which certain materials are acceptable to slow readers. Flexibility in grouping is important. When students are able to learn effectively, they often do so quite rapidly. Poor readers who are placed in appealing materials with which they can identify and cope may often learn much more than had been anticipated by everyone concerned. These children should be able to move up to higher groups.

An initial reading inventory should be administered to all students. During the two weeks our teachers work before students actually arrive for school in the fall, we get most all of our students in and administer an initial reading inventory. After all these tests have been administered, we arrange the classrooms so that most teachers only have three reading groups. If this isn't done, the teachers would have seven or eight reading groups in a classroom, or adjust groups. When this happens, all students are not receiving the most productive instruction.

After the classrooms have been set up, and after a few days of instruction, some few changes usually need to be made. We do find that occasionally we do get a child placed in the wrong group. The teachers developed the initial reading inventories that we use. They have been trained in developing these, and they are based on the stories found in our lead basal reader.

Emphasis on finishing the book must be removed. The first year I taught, I walked into the teachers' lounge and two teachers who looked for every opportunity to criticize me were sitting in there. They asked me where I was in Social Studies. I told them, and their response was "You'll never be able to finish the book." My response was that I didn't know I had to finish. Emphasis should be on mastery teaching. It is better to teach one thing well than to attempt to teach many things and learn nothing. A developmental reading program does not require students to complete books within specified time limits. One type of individual difference is the rate at which certain tasks can be mastered. A fourth grader who completes a story on page 75 of a third-grade text at the end of a school year should, after appropriate review, begin on page 75 the following fall. Exposing students to skills at a pace more rapid than they can accept creates frustration, fragmented and vague learning, and failure. Expecting students to skip skills located near the end of a book and still achieve success in mastering more sophisticated abilities at the next higher grade level causes the same results. Both are inconsistent with what we know about learning and educational psychology.

Students should not be placed in advanced, average, or slow groups, or groups arranged without some criteria by the administrator. By waiting until all students have been administered the initial reading inventory to set up classrooms, and each teacher having one of the upper groups, a middle or average group, and a slow group, there is still a heterogeneous group in the classroom. We have yet to have any problem with black/white ratios or male/female ratios. Many schools jumped on the band-wagon and tried

the Joplin plan - that is when you ring a bell, everybody goes and reads with a group at his reading level, and another bell rings and reading ends and you go back with your regular group. With this arrangement, teachers just assumed that all children in the class were reading at the same level, and gave all children the same book. The literature indicates that ability or achievement grouping decreases the range of individual differences by only 10 to 20 %. With this kind of grouping there is also the tendency for the brighter students to become snobbish and somewhat intolerant of their peers, and slower students tend to acquire negative self-concepts. This then results in decreased motivation and increased passive or hostile attitudes. Less efficient students also suffer from the absence of successful peer models with which they might identify.

We experience the most difficulty in getting teachers of combination classrooms to ignore the grade designations of their students. The emphasis is on providing for the specific needs of all children as they would in any regular classroom. With our empasis on the reading and math programs we do not have the problems that others might experience. Students are grouped according to their needs no matter what grade they happen to be in. This will not be a problem when you are not teaching grade level books.

Special reading teachers are to use materials other than those that are state-adopted as basal readers. Materials selected for use by the remedial reading teachers should not be available for other teachers to use. This prevents children from responding to an assignment with "Oh, but I've had that!"

The distribution of textbooks is an important aspect of our program. It is also important to point out here that teachers should have a voice in textbook selection. Textbooks must not be distributed until all students have been given an initial reading inventory. Textbooks must be distributed

according to students needs, not according to grade lines. A procedure must be established where teachers can share materials with a minimum of confusion and effort. If it is impossible for all teachers to be teaching reading at the same time due to the shortage of materials, reading periods may be staggered. Supplemental materials for teaching reading and the skills should be housed and dispensed in an orderly and organized way. Ours are kept together in one of our reading rooms. If we need to see what teachers are teaching a certain level, there is a chart on the wall in the reading room that gives us the information immediately. We know who is teaching a particular level and just how many students are in that level.

Provisions similar to those in reading should be made in all academic areas to provide for individual differences and needs. This is not an easy task. It is very time consuming, and at best a slow process. Finding material for skinny books and single concept cards at the various levels for the different units of study seems at times to be impossible. The only thing to do is start looking and purchasing according to your needs. Once completed, then you can take pride in your accomplishments.

Provisions must be made for evaluating the effectiveness of a developmental reading program. These plans should be carefully planned and implemented continuously by all school personnel. In spite of all the controversy over standardized testing, we do recommend that they be used as only one way of evaluating. Post initial reading inventories are an excellent way to see how much progress has been made on the actual material that is being taught. We use a different form that the teachers have designed to test in the spring. Other evaluation activities may include attitude inventories, data on dropouts, data on attendance, survey of discipline problems, survey of student opinions, survey of teacher opinions, survey of parent opinions, survey of library usuage, and a survey of specialized personnel. Both pre- and post-measures should be employed, for it is important

to know to what extent we accomplish our objectives. It is essential that the initial planning be done carefully. There must be a program of information dissemination which should be carefully planned and implemented continuously by all school personnel. Many good ideas fail because the public is not adequately informed and involved in both planning and production. There are many possible ways of communicating with the public. These include, P. T. A. Meetings, Open Houses, American Education Week Activities, Newsletters to parents, radio, television, and newspapers.

Parents should be reported to for the purpose of evaluating their children's progress. All of us need to examine our grading practices, and it is not my purpose to tell you how to do this. You must find the best way to handle this in your situation. In many situations, grades just aren't fair, and it is a wonder that students put up with them. I agree with Dr. Madeline Hunter when she says that our job is to help students be right not to catch them being wrong.

The organization of a developmental reading program should be preceded and accompanied carefully-planned in-service activities for all professional personnel. Emphasis should be placed on developing skills, concepts, and attitudes necessary to implement a program. The implications of a developmental program should be understood by all personnel. Such a program can be instituted only if a carefully-organized, comprehensive series of practical in-service sessions are conducted at regular intervals. This should assist each professional - the administrator, supervisor, teacher, librarian, special reading teacher, etc. - to recognize his own areas of responsibility and opportunity.

Every school should have a program development specialist. A reading teacher can assume this responsibility. This

person will assist the entire staff in developing a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning. She can assist in developing the strategies for implementing your plan, provide in-service training for the rest of the staff, provide demonstration lessons, train aides and volunteers, present P. T. A. programs about your reading program, she can evaluate or assist in evaluating materials, and can assist in developing materials such as initial reading inventories, comprehension questions, skills sequences and the materials needed to teach the skills, and provide learning center materials.

Before any program is started there should be a needs assessment. An inventory should be made of pupils, parents, teachers, aides, and the program. Besides these assessments, every person should sign a committment to the planned program.

There are four facets of a well-balanced reading program. The first facet is basic skills. There are three types of basic skills, word attack, vocabulary, and comprehension. Instruction in these areas should be initiated in kindergarten, and continued daily until the pupil leaves school, not at the end of the primary grades. There are six useful ways to attack unknown words. One is by context. This involves using the surrounding words in the sentence or paragraph to identify an undnown word. A second way is by phonics or letter-sound association. A third way is structure. Structure consists of syllabication, root words, and affixes. Normally this is used in conjunction with the letter-sound associations, which should be used along with context rather than in isolation. In beginning reading, picture clues and configuration are used as a means of word attack, and the most sophisticated method of teaching word attack is with the use of the dictionary.

Vocabulary teaching involves listening, speaking, reading, writing, and the fifth is a composite of the other four, which is thinking. The other basic skill is comprehension. The three types of comprehension are literal, implied, and creative. Six ways to teach comprehension are finding the

main idea, the supporting details, classifying, outlining, sequencing, and predicting outcomes.

Another facet of a well-balanced reading program is oral reading. Oral reading may be used to diagnose, to prove a point, choral reading, entertain others, to inform others and for self-use.

The third facet of the well-balanced reading program is recreational reading. This is reading for appreciation of the material, it varies according to the individual taste of the students, there should be variety in recreational reading, and it reinforces the skills that have been taught.

A fourth facet of a well-balanced reading program is content-area reading. Children should learn to evaluate the material they read. They should learn to locate material by the use of the card catalog, encyclopedia, dictionaries, other reference materials, and the ability to locate material by using the parts of the book such as the table of contents and the index. Students must be taught how to organize material once it has been collected. The organization skills include outlining, note-taking and summarizing.

Children must be taught to interpret material. They must know the difference between creative and critical reading. When most principals go into a classroom to observe, they do not know what should be going on in the way of reading instruction? Those principals who do are exceptional principals. Anyone observing in a classroom should be able to observe the following: Phonic skills being taught in context rather than in isolation. You should never hear a teacher saying b- as in buh and d as in duh, but b as in ball, bat, box, etc. New vocabulary words should be taught in context and not in isolation. Oral reading should be done for a specific purpose and not round robin reading. Students should be using materials in which they can be successsful, and not every child in the classroom using the same material. Notice the children as they leave school The books children take home to read should

be easier than the ones they use in the classroom. Mastery tests should be given at the end of each reading book and if the child has not mastered the material, then a horizontal approach to instruction must be used. At the beginning of the second grade level, children should be answering comprehension questions on paper. Until this time they are answered orally. Children should not be given formal spelling lists until they can read at least at a second grade level. You do not want to see any spelling bees taking place. If there are 30 students in the classroom, and you have a spelling bee, there will be 29 losers. Spelling bees do not help poor spellers. We want children and as many children as possible to win without having losers. In most classrooms there will be some children who will profit from the Language Experience Approach. You should observe some evidence of this when you go into the classroom. Children should also do creative writing almost everyday. Look around the classroom for creative writing, or ask a child about his writing. Every principal should provide an abundance of material for the teachers to use. In the abundance of material there should be duplicating materials at all levels with more materials available at the lowest levels. Just because you have purchased one book on teaching implied meaning doesn't mean that you have enough material. Be sure that you are making maximum use of the reading teachers. It has been suggested that one could be made the Program Development Specialsit. She might develop files of material that teachers can use in various areas of the curriculum, and she can assist in providing staff development for the teachers.

Time should be set aside in each school day for recreational reading. It is well to reward students who read. We have a rather extensive rewards program in our school that I would like to share with you. The children who read each morning from the time they arrive at school until time for classes to begin are rewarded in a different way each month. Students do not know in advance what the reward will be. A class recorder keeps a record of the children who read, and children are not penalized for being absent. Some records are kept in composition books, some are kept on a bulletin board, and other teachers have

developed their own unique system of keeping the class records. Children who cannot read are permitted to use single concept cards and single concept sentences. Some examples of rewards that have been used are: a party, a movie, making cookies, and a trip to the museum. All children who read every morning all year last year were given a trip to Carowinds, an amusement park similar to Six Flags.

A tree is in the reception area of the school. When a child completes a book, the child reports to the principal and she writes the name of the book on one side of a symbol and the child's name on the other side. The symbol is then hung on the tree. Colored leaves were used in September, ghost and witches in October, Turkeys in November, Christmas ornaments in December, snowmen in in January, and valentines in February. At the end of the month the books are counted and the five children who have read the most books during the month receive a guest pass to MacDonald's.

Children reading two years below grade level are permitted to read skinny books. For each book a child reads, a report is filled out and filed in the media center. Periodically the media specialist, aide, or principal spot-checks to make sure the books have actually been read. Patches that can be sewn on a sweater or jacket are presented to children who read 100 books. For reading each additional 100 books, a child earns another bar. When a child has completed 500 books, he receives a bar with 500 on it and a T-shirt that says, "Southwest Elementary, 500 books read," on the front. Children reading two years below grade level are able to count skinny books toward their total. In order to keep good readers reading in more advanced literature, we let every fifty pages count as one book. The number of pages could be modified for higher grades. Each child keeps his record of books read. The teachers spot check to make sure the children are reading the books they have on the list. At the end of the year the information is placed in the child's record to be used the following year. The book count starts when the children enter our school and continues as long as the child is in this school. For each one hundred books read past five hundred, the child

receives a guest pass to Mac Donald's, and any child reading one thousand books gets an extra special reward, hopefully an airplane ride.

Individual teachers provide awards for reading every morning, and for reading 25, 50 and 75 books. These include stars to pin on made from scraps retreived from a printing company, written messages of commendation, book markers, and other things the creative teacher devises.

The media specialist has an important role in the school reading program. She must locate the necessary books to broaden the children's interest and to follow up the classroom instruction. She can assist in the rewards program, teach skills lessons and assist in evaluating the entire program.

Very briefly, the steps involved in teaching the developmental reading lesson are as follows. The vocabulary words are taught in context, and every child must make 70 or above on the vocabulary test before reading the story. The teaching, testing, and review exercises for vocabulary teaching are available through our program development specialist. All teachers have received training in the correct way to teach vocabulary.

After all students pass the vocabulary test, the teacher builds a background for reading the story. This is the second step in teaching the developmental reading lesson. The third step is the purpose setting questions. These should be written on the board and should focus on main ideas rather than minor details. These questions provide the students with a purpose for reading the story. This is followed by the silent reading. During the silent reading, the teacher is able to work with another group.

When a student finishes reading his story, he should close his book and secure a copy of the comprehension questions from a designated spot. Answers to these should be written in complete sentences. The questions follow this basic format: 1 - 3 are literal, 4 - 6 are implied, 7 - 9 are vocabulary, and 10 is creative. These are available to the teachers for all books used in our reading program. If children cannot average 70 or above in answering

these questions, the reading book they are using is too difficult and they should be moved to a lower level.

After all students in a group have completed writing their answers, the group is then ready to discuss the story. After children reach level 10 or 3^2, their main oral reading experiences will come in reading the questions aloud during the checking of the papers, and in resolving conflicts about the most appropriate responses.

The final part of the developmental reading lesson is extended and related activities. There are many activities that my be included in this section. One is if the reading selection is an excerpt from a book, the teacher might suggest the students read the book in its entirety, or she might suggest that the students read another book by the same author, or a book on the same subject. Another type of activity might be the presentation and development of specific skills. Skills groups may be composed of students from several different reading groups. Students in the different reading groups will need the same skills lessons. Other extended and related activities should include working with synonyms, antonyms, and homonyms for the vocabulary words.

If these things aren't going on in your schook, then it is time you start with in-service training so that all teachers are taught how to teach a developmental reading lesson, and all the other points that have been mentioned.